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ABSTRACT

An examination of language use in 19th century Brussels seeks to explain how and why a link between language and social class came into operation. Hypotheses relating the social characteristics (material circumstances and consciousness) of social classes and segments of social classes to various resulting language patterns are proposed. This approach addresses the socialization function of language, whereby language becomes an instrument for the advancement of social and cultural unity and serves the interests of a given class or group in its struggle for cultural and political hegemony. In this context, language is found to acquire a role in the creation of a situation of dominance, in the penetration of bourgeois society by a system of values, convictions, and attitudes that perpetuated bourgeois order. A powerful ideology of language thus led to an improved social control. The analysis looks at the situations of the working class, the "petite bourgeoisie," the bourgeoisie, and the intelligentsia and their interrelations as manifested in and determined by language usage. (MSE)

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"THE ESSENCE OF LANGUAGE IS HISTORY"

A THEORETICAL INTRODUCTION TO THE CONNECTION BETWEEN SOCIAL RELATIONS AND LANGUAGE RELATIONS IN 19th CENTURY BRUSSELS

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Résumé / Abstract

Cette communication tente de mettre en évidence les liens qui existent entre relations sociales et structures linguistiques à Bruxelles au XIXe siècle. Notre point de départ est la formulation de diverses hypothèses qui mettent en rapport les caractéristiques des classes sociales et les différentes structures linguistiques qui en résultent. Ce contexte nous amène à considérer le langage comme créateur d'une situation de dominance, comme un élément du statut social et un instrument d'exclusion et de mobilité sociales. Cela présuppose un lien très étroit avec l'image que les membres d'une classe ou d'un groupe social se font de leur propre situation en société. Dans ce cadre général nous formulons des hypothèses concernant la présence d'une "aristocratie ouvrière", dont la perception sociale aurait été liée au désir de respectabilité, caractérisé par l'adoption du français comme langue courante. L'importance de la composante petite bourgeoisie dans la morphologie sociale bruxelloise nous a obligé à analyser ce groupe du point de vue de la position sociale et de l'identité idéologique, deux indicateurs de l'importance de ces deux facteurs pour l'étude de la situation linguistique à Bruxelles au XIXe siècle. Les origines, la structure et les fonctions de l'élite locale nous ont permis en outre de formuler des hypothèses concernant les attitudes linguistiques de la bourgeoisie bruxelloise.

At a previous meeting in Quebec, in 1983, I sketched the results already available of social-demographic research on language usage in 19th century Brussels. In that analysis, language was seen primarily as the result of demographic processes, as a geographic-linguistic factor linking native language with place of birth. There I stressed the great importance of migration in the growth of the capital and its link with shifts in language practices.

Here, I will put the accent on another facet of language, seeking to explain how and why a link between language and social class came into operation. In the present text I will limit myself to raising problems and formulating hypotheses but hope elsewhere to go more deeply into the results of the research.

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I shall thus attempt to connect the social relations of Brussels with language relations, through the formulation of hypotheses relating the social characteristics of social classes (concerning both material circumstances and consciousness) as well as segments of social classes to the various resulting language patterns. To this end, we must broach the socialization function of language, whereby language becomes an instrument for the advancement of social and cultural unity and serves the interests of a given class or group in its struggle for cultural and political hegemony.

In this context, language acquired a role in the creation of a situation of dominance, in the penetration of bourgeois society by a system of values, convictions, attitudes that perpetuated bourgeois order. A powerful ideology of language thus led to an improved social control, as a system of justification for the hold on power by a particular language group.

Language as an element of status, as an instrument of social exclusion and mobility, also supposes a strong link with the perception of social position, with the evaluation by members of a class or group of their situation in society. In so far as shifts in language usage in 19th century Brussels were the result of choice we are compelled to find out how a potential perception of their situation by social groups could make specific forms of language-choice behaviour possible.

To fully cover this subject within the time allotted, I have restricted my analysis of the social-economic relations of 19th century Brussels to a minimum and will spare you the details of much statistical analysis.

I. The Working Class

The organization of trades in Brussels industry and the relative prosperity of specialized and highly skilled sectors, such as the printing, precision and luxury trades, imply the presence of a highly skilled labour force. Such a "labour aristocracy" has been ascribed, especially in the United Kingdom, a social perception consisting typically of the individualistic interiorisation of bourgeois values, values which in 19th century Brussels could have been coupled with the striving for "respectability" typified by the habitual usage of French.

Several British historians have seen in the presence of this privileged stratum of the working class an explanation for the integration of that class into bourgeois society and for the failure of class consciousness to develop in a revolutionary direction. This labour aristocracy attained its privileged status through greater job security, better working and living conditions, higher and more regular wages, relatively closer relations with the "petite bourgeoisie" and "authority at work".

Through housing patterns, through their own social and cultural life, they emphasized their own identity, their own subculture characterized by the domination of bourgeois ideology. Such status values as respectability, social improvement, independence, were transformed through a workers' tradition of collective help and strength, dignity and freedom, and acquired thereby a new meaning. According to the labour aristocracy theory, at the end of the 19th century bourgeois ideology — in a modified form — succeeded in penetrating the broader sectors of the working class, with the artisan elite joining its ranks, resulting in a clearer demarcation between workers and bourgeoisie.

It is striking that the urban economic structure, the context of most analyses of the working class elite, presents a forceful analogy with the economic situation of Brussels: its national impact, an industry oriented towards a local luxury market, the presence of a national elite and intelligentsia and of many skilled workers, the absence of a homogeneous bourgeoisie (i.e. a large gap between a closed "haute bourgeoisie" and a large number of small entrepreneurs and self-employed people). Indeed, studies of the Brussels labour movement show a certain cooperation between the labour elite and the liberal intelligentsia.

Nevertheless this theory is inadequate on some points: studies relating to the formation of a working class in other European countries point out that the heterogeneity within the working class could not always be reduced to a narrow elite versus the broad mass of workers, but rather that there was a continuity of diverse strata within the working class, each with its own subculture.

Moreover, it has been shown that the absence of a proletarian consciousness was not exclusive to the labour elite. The historian Gareth Stedman JONES (1971) characterized the level of consciousness for the 19th century London "casual poor" as a mingling of violence and reformism and attributed the low level of consciousness of the entire working class in London to the industrial structure of the capital.

In this context it is often argued that an artisan working class that shared the same social origins, culture of work and experiences as its employers — small entrepreneurs — was more easily inclined to identify with the boss, did not experience any class barriers, and held the same values as the masters — including perhaps language values.

Nevertheless, we have noted in Brussels a rather early split between workers and masters due to increasingly conflicting interests, and it is true that the Brussels working class was not quite so singular in its variety.

From the preceding analysis, what questions for further inquiry can we ask about language usage among the Brussels working class in the 19th century? Did the heterogeneous Brussels proletariat have a uniform linguistic attitude? In so far as we can detect relevant

lines of division within the working class, the question remains whether or not the dividing lines coincided with a language barrier.

We have noted the possible existence of "ethnic" divisions within the working class: pedlars and immigrants formed an increasingly numerous reserve army of labour that lowered wages and drove up rents. In the first half of the century, the weakest economic sectors held the highest concentration of the dependent poor and operated at the same time as a particular pole of attraction for immigrants.

This compels us to search for other relevant differences (for example in material conditions of life, housing and so on) that could promote different attitudes to language usage.

Beforehand, we should naturally examine how far the eventual boundaries can be reduced to differences in geographic-linguistic recruiting (ethnic sub-culture versus working class solidarity). To what extent can we state, in a contrasting sense that the daily reality of work, home and neighbourhood, demonstrates outwardly visible linguistic differences that are consistent with outward class differences? If so, perhaps an individual consciousness that takes account of the cohesion of linguistic and class boundaries was created, a consciousness with a marked influence on class perceptions and values.

If indeed in mid-19th century Brussels a labour elite enjoyed material well-being and a social identity of its own, then we must ask ourselves if we can in fact couple such values as dignity, self-respect and collective improvement with the habitual practice of French. Moreover, it is still more pertinent to ask if these social forces were strong enough to enforce changes in language usage in the informal sphere.

The presence of a labour aristocracy provides a possible explanation of the broader quantitative impact of the French language in Brussels in the 19th century. Some Belgian historians have regarded the monopoly of the Brussels labour movement by an artisan elite with a particular class perception as the primary reason for the early reformist direction of that movement and for its readiness to shift to the French language. They also emphasize the early appearance of an alliance between an artisan popular movement and left-wing intellectuals. But the labour aristocracy theory falls short as an answer to the important questions of why the shift to French suddenly shot up at the end of the century, and why until that point it had remained stable.

In order to explain the massive Frenchification from the turn of the century onward we must take into account broader processes of socialization, which were so profound and effective that in two to three generations large sectors of the working class shifted through bilingualism to the exclusive practice of French.

A prominent instrument in this transformation was education. The internalization of a dominant system of values through a given

language could be transmitted through various layers of the working class by schooling. Given the low school attendance and poor organization of education generally, the workers' child in Brussels before 1880 was able to escape the full impact of the French-language educational system. The reasons for exclusion of workers from education lay in the pull of socio-economic relations and the maintenance of a consciousness of class division. The high level of illiteracy, especially among Dutch-speaking children, and the low level of school attendance, were the consequences of this in Brussels and elsewhere.

The changing needs of capitalism and of the bourgeois state at the end of the 19th century gave an impetus to educational reform designed to acculturate the working classes into bourgeois society. This new approach appeared in Brussels as early as the 1880's, leading to more extensive provisions for education accompanied by a plan for the gradual change over from instruction in the native tongue to completely French-language instruction, the so-called Buls system, after the name of its instigator. That the Buls plan was a tremendous boost to shifts in language usage appears in the following data: an 1880 study of 7 Brussels schools revealed that 80% of the pupils spoke Dutch at home. In 1913 this percentage was already reduced to 56%. Through the permeation of a bourgeois ideology, including a perception of the superiority of the French over the Dutch language, this plan degenerated into a "system of education for the humiliation of Flemish."

We have noted above the possibility of a status-sensitivity among certain sectors or workers. How far can this be equated with a sensitivity to social mobility within the working class?

All studies of the working class in the nineteenth century point out the absence of real social mobility for workers and of a notion of individual social mobility, of "climbing up by one's own bootstraps", in the value system of workers of that era. The evolution of social relations in Brussels points to the poignant impoverishment of the masses of the working population during the 19th century, followed by a slight material improvement as the century drew to its close. This coincided with a growing gap between workers and "petits bourgeois", at least in terms of housing. There was no question of jumping over the class barriers. The only mobility worthy of note was horizontal mobility between different professional groups of workers, still within the working class. Only those workers who had succeeded in accumulating savings over the years were able to start a small business as small shopkeepers or self-employed people and eventually acquiring the status of "petit bourgeois". This course was open in fact almost only to the best paid and best skilled artisans.

The struggle for some material security also expressed itself in the acquisition of one's own home (again, this was restricted to a small stratum of workers, those able to save enough money) or in education and apprenticeships for the children.

That opportunities — however limited — could be differentiated not only on the basis of material strata within the working class, but also in terms of their geographic origins (native or immigrant), creates a specific area of research, too broad for us to explore here.

The class position of workers and its consequences in education (barriers to learning, etc.) and the absence of the notion of "social mobility" in the working class mentality reduce to a minimum the impact of social mobility as a potential factor in the Frenchification of the 19th century Brussels working class. The only significant mobility was downwards, i.e. that of a higher stratum of workers that was absorbed into the working class.

The ideological and linguistic result of this process is not known, and could have worked as well for the preservation as for the loss of language practices: we can formulate the hypothesis of a labour elite seeking to compensate for its loss in material position by affirmation of its social status through its ability to speak French. We can just as easily present the hypothesis that greater social contacts between the former elite and other workers, the cutting away of internal status distinctions within the working class, would lead to the homogenization of old sub-cultures and the mingling of previously divided linguistic entities. Added to other pressures of linguistic socialization, this would result either in Frenchification or the maintenance of Dutch as a first language, partially depending on the linguistic dominance in the particular setting.

II. The "Petite Bourgeoisie"

The connotations surrounding the term "petite bourgeoisie" are varied — the white-collar proletariat of employees, teachers, etc. and the heterogeneous group of small entrepreneurs or independent producers. The importance of this group in the social morphology of Brussels is evident from the large community of employees, small merchants etc. who were settled there and whose numbers increased throughout the century. The analysis of the group in terms of social position and ideological identity is one of the first indications of its importance for the study of the 19th century Brussels language situation. Although employees could be considered a sector of the working class in terms of their relation to the means of production, they themselves relied heavily on their own perception of their status and on their way of life — more bourgeois than the bourgeoisie — and thus developed a consciousness that did not entirely fit with their objective situation.

We must also mention that in the 19th century, lower civil servants were differentiated from the working class by higher earnings and greater job security, more free time and a stronger bond with their employers.

The above factors also clarify the heterogeneity within this group — bank employees often had higher salaries, while many lower

civil servants and teachers faced a daily struggle to keep up a respectable way of life within their inadequate income.

Such discrepancies between material situation and consciousness were expressed in their central core of beliefs. Status, individualism, and mobility, elements of a bourgeois ideology, were made into a specific system of values, characterized by a rather rigid version of bourgeois values and an imitative behaviour, acting "as if". Status insecurity and aspirations of mobility could thus explain patterns of consumption, oriented to social recognition ("suitable" household furnishings, wardrobe, servants, cuisine) and an intense, socially isolated family life.

"The aspirations for mobility" in terms of individual social mobility illustrate their individualistic analysis of their own situation: failure and success were experienced as personal shortcomings of victories. The slight chances for social improvement, the difficulties in keeping up bourgeois appearances on a paltry income, shed further light on their aspirations for status "... always essential to allow the satisfaction of ambition that genuine social mobility could not afford to many." (CROSSICK, 1980)

Supposing that there was an analogous situation in Brussels, and referring for that purpose to the findings of an historical study on the struggle of the Brussels Flamingants, we learn that nearly all employees and teachers, in order to keep up the appearance of respectability on their inadequate salaries, were led to spend a considerable part of their income on the rent of a "suitable" dwelling. The menace of impoverishment of this group at the turn of the century had undoubtedly an effect on the mentality of the group of employees in Brussels.

Just as such outer signs of respectability as housing and clothing off-set the constant fear of a steadily approaching threat of poverty, so could language be used as a further affirmation of status. Employees had ample opportunity to discover that material improvements in standards of life in Brussels were restricted through French-language dominance: an educational system that had been totally taken over by French, a French-language administration, French-language economic life, always demanded a sufficient knowledge of French for the employees living in Brussels.

Other groups within the "petite bourgeoisie" such as shopkeepers and small producers also grasped the importance of education for social mobility for their children (which did not yet require great expenditure on their part). This path to social mobility in Brussels had to go through the French language, through French schools. The Brussels "petite bourgeoisie" was indeed a solid support for the dominance of the French language, as has been shown by numerous studies. The importation of Flamingantism in the first half of the 19th century to Brussels by young teachers and employees from Antwerp calls attention to the absence of a native Flemish-language or Flamingant group among "petit bourgeois" intellectuals.

Few members within this group of Flamingant intellectuals of modest social origin and deprived of the vote have analysed the linguistic oppositions in terms of social distinctions.

The conformity of the main body of Brussels employees stimulated and reinforced their cultural break with the working class. Our research into the geographical origins, patterns of housing and marriage ties of employees in a Brussels suburb at mid-century leads us to suppose an analogous situation within the city-limits.

Although shopkeepers and small producers held much the same value system as employees, we ought still to underline the specificity of this group, most evident in the form of greater heterogeneity and stability. Relatively stable and substantial men of commerce as well as small self-employed people locked in struggle against the pull back down into the working classes, and even sub-proletarian pedlars and hawkers who struggled for survival, could be found in this varied social group.

In order to grasp the language practices of such a diffuse group, we would do well to define it in its relations to other classes. That the relations of this sector of the "petite bourgeoisie" with the bourgeoisie and the working class varied according to the material position of those concerned, can readily be inferred from the pattern of relationships sketched above.

In general, we can indeed state that this group was oriented around broad economic activities and had little contact with the upper bourgeoisie. Research into the Brussels as well as the European elite has shown that there was scarcely a "narrow gate" from the "petite bourgeoisie" into the elite. The upper bourgeoisie around the turn of the century sought to narrow this gate further, and created a greater barrier to education than before. Teacher or employee became the highest status attainable for the child of the "petite bourgeoisie".

Downward mobility — i.e. into the working class — remained more feasible than upward. The lowest strata of small commerce or artisan production marked the boundary line between workers and "petite bourgeoisie", and offered mobility for rural immigrants and a Brussels' working class elite, which could with limited capital and minimal education open a small shop, café or one-man business.

Whatever mobility was involved was slight; it seldom led to profound changes in social milieu or social identity and did not always represent an improvement in social status.

Not only economic heterogeneity but also instability typified the perception by these sectors of the "petite bourgeoisie" of their situation. Quite a few shopkeepers and self-employed people were not born into the social milieu they were now part of, or did not long remain in it and children rarely inherited their father's trade.

From this flowed an individualistic interpretation of the achievement of social position as a personal adventure, and a

defensive manoeuvre against the constant threat of impoverishment. In Brussels, these attitudes were sharpened by a greater level of activity of home - and large - scale industry, resulting in a greater distance from the bourgeoisie in a material sense and an estrangement from the working class in an ideological sense.

To retain respectability in the face of creditors was scarcely possible, and then only through a more "businesslike" approach in their enterprises, the depression of wages and greater self-exploitation, longer working days and forcing wives and children to work.

Diversity within the commercial and industrial "petite bourgeoisie" also took a social form. A double orientation toward the bourgeoisie as well as toward the working class demonstrated the ambiguity of their position.

Dependent on the bourgeoisie for credit, they lived and worked among and with labourers, who were also their clientele and for whom they often acted as money-lenders. The trend of social contacts varied from weaker to stronger in keeping with the neighbourhood where they lived and worked, their own social origin and that of their spouses. Traders in a working class district had daily experience with workers as clients, neighbours, family members, tenants and debtors. Frequently they played the role of local elite. Since these "petits bourgeois" often lived and worked in the same social sphere, the neighbourhood is a highly important reference point in the study of this group.

We must not idealize this fact — a shared social life could on the contrary be the source of great conflicts. Feelings of understanding and sympathy could quickly shift to spite and the fear of proletarianization. The protection against this was often the insistence on minor points of respectability — such as the usage of French in Brussels. Ambiguous relations underline ambiguous values and attitudes, even towards language. Did the "petite bourgeoisie" in 19th century Brussels provide an impetus for the shift to French?

The aspirations for social mobility and for a respected position, conformity and the differentiation from the working class are examples towards a greater integration of bourgeois values, despite (or thanks to) a growing material distance from the "haute bourgeoisie" and a continual struggle against impoverishment. The political integration of this group can be illustrated through the lowering of the property qualification for voting rights in 1848, the multiple voting system and its role as a political buffer at the end of the century. If we combine this with the importance the "petite bourgeoisie" attached to the French-language Brussels schools as an instrument for mobility, then the supposition acquires substance. We would then have to see if these findings were reflected in the material situation of the Brussels "petit bourgeois" i.e. such as the presence of servants, etc. and if they could be differentiated by familial and neighbourhood surroundings. We will take the geographical-linguistic recruitment of this group as a starting point for their shift in language usage.

III. The bourgeoisie

The concentration of the economy in one place with an increasingly national scope and with the capacity to carry the load of national finance had important consequences for the composition of the Brussels bourgeoisie.

The centering of political, administrative and financial functions in Brussels created a local social elite with a national radius, structured around three closely inter-connected poles, the palace and the nobility, the higher levels of the administration and government, and the world of high finance.

The personal links within this highly select group are well illustrated by the Société Générale Bank. A few members of the bourgeoisie held the reins of political, economic and financial power. Bound by family ties and few in number, they arranged for political and financial interests themselves and, as it were, formed a single entity. We have noted a somewhat early assimilation of bourgeois fortunes into the nobility and a gradual restructuring of this elite to the benefit of the increasing preponderence of the "nouveaux riches" over the course of the 19th century. This group grew richer throughout the century and was increasingly distant from the "petite bourgeoisie" and the proletariat.

On the basis of these observations we can already develop a few hypotheses on the language attitudes of the Brussels bourgeoisie. The early pattern of cooperation between bourgeois on the way up and a still powerfully entrenched nobility was illustrated by their sharing of power within the Société Générale and the Banque de Belgique. The bourgeoisie reinforced their still weak position by taking up the cultural habits of the nobility, including the wielding of French as the language of culture. In this way the gap between the bourgeoisie and the rest of the population widened futher. The closed nature of the elite suggests analogous effects on language. The climb into the Brussels elite was never quick for "nouveaux riches" but on the contrary took up to three generations since it required the building up of a material power base and the right sort of marital alliances before a share in political and economic decision making was allowed. It was therefore not enough to attain a suitable material position in order to be included in the "haute bourgeoisie"; it was essential as well to display the outer signs of bourgeois status, to show that one was familiar with manners, ways of life, values, culture ... and language. The acculturation process, requiring a few generations, thus assured an ideological homogeneity.

Geographical origins could be used as well to restrict access into the bourgeoisie, so that recruitment was restricted by preference to natives, and only occasionally open to an already acclimatized newcomer. It is clear that the narrow gate into the Brussels elite could only be opened with the French "open sesame", although this was certainly no problem for the vast majority of the rich: The bourgeoisie in Brussels and Flanders had accepted French as the sole language of culture for decades.

What was the relationship between the elite and the intelligentsia, those who through interests, ideology and ways of life were linked with the bourgeoisie and who contributed to the supervision of the state and ideology? Several factors suggest that the cultural and social unity of these useful classes with the higher reaches of the bourgeoisie included unity of language: the alliance between intellectuals and bourgeoisie in the revolution of 1830, accentuated in its linguistic aspects by the Frenchification of the administration, education and the courts, the frequent organizational links between the two groups, to take only the role of lawyers, magistrates, high-level employees of the Société Générale, the impact of exiled French intellectuals in the Brussels bourgeois society.

Through our research we shall try to discover if fractions within the bourgeoisie were clearly delineated by graphical-linguistic recruitment and language usage and if these strata were compatible with economic and social sub-strata.

The power of a foreign bourgeoisie and its degree of integration into the Brussels elite also merits further study, as does the potential concern of the still ascendent bourgeoisie for linguistic diversity.

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